

FOREVER FREE

WORKING TO KEEP ILLINOIS WATERWAYS
ACCESSIBLE FOR EVERYONE.

Since time immemorial, the Middle Fork of the Vermilion River has carved a shaded path through oak and maple forests, a natural highway for canoes and a lifeline for countless species in the land that is now called Illinois.

In a state where industrial agriculture and development have destroyed 99.99% of native prairies and drained 90% of historic wetlands, the late Bruce Hannon, founder of Prairie Rivers Network, spoke a profound truth:

“THE RIVERS ARE THE PLACE
WHERE NATURE STILL EXISTS.”

A day on the Middle Fork — or the Salt Fork or the DuPage or the Embarras or many others — provides a connection to the place we call home and the wildlife that still remains. Great blue herons wade through shallows, kingfishers plunge into the water for fish, and river otters glide past sun-warmed turtles. Fireflies and dragonflies dance above waters teeming with bluegill, sunfish, and bass — a reminder that we share this land with a vibrant community of life.

But today, the state of Illinois is attempting to deny us our heritage. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources claims that 98% of rivers and streams in Illinois are not public waterways, effectively denying people their legal right to access these natural resources. This stance not only contradicts state and federal law but violates Illinois’ public trust doctrine, which guarantees public access to waters for recreation and other uses.

Rivers are woven into Illinois’ identity and history. They played a vital role in shaping the state’s development. Early settlers — including Abraham Lincoln — used rivers like the Sangamon, Kaskaskia, and Rock for travel, trade, and fishing, and communities grew around these waterways. Rivers weren’t just corridors for commerce; they were also a source of recreation and sustenance. And of course long before Lincoln and the

European settlers navigated Illinois’ rivers, indigenous people did so. Illinois’ rivers have been used for navigation since time immemorial. This tradition of public use continues today, but it’s threatened.

A cynic might suspect that the state’s position is strategic: Limit river access and you limit public awareness of environmental degradation from industrial agriculture and coal mining. If the people of Illinois saw the sorry state of our rivers, the people of Illinois might want to do something about it.

But at Prairie Rivers Network, it’s our job to see what’s happening with our rivers, and to do something about it. With our Clean Water Forever campaign, we are working to transform our culture in a way that celebrates our rivers but also the right of public access — something that’s more accepted out west and even in neighboring states like Iowa and Indiana. We are pushing for a new bill in the legislature to enshrine access forever. And we’re ensuring that people know they have a right to swim, canoe, and fish.

The Middle Fork flows for miles through some of the wildest, most scenic areas of Illinois. In fact, it’s the state’s only designated National Scenic River, recognized for its beauty and importance. By securing public access to rivers like the Middle Fork, we protect not only our right to enjoy them, but also the health and well-being of the ecosystems and people they support.

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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

MAGGIE BRUNS



For decades, Prairie Rivers Network has been a voice for Illinois' rivers, land, and wildlife. We've fought alongside communities like yours to secure stronger coal ash regulations, protect clean water from agricultural pollution, and pushed Illinois forward in the clean energy transition. We've

defended rivers, wetlands and aquifers, rang the alarm about drifting pesticides across our landscapes, and stood up for every person's right to a healthful environment. And yet, as our work today has never felt more threatened, we know that our team's "to-do" list has never been more important.

By the time you receive this newsletter, the stories in this edition will likely be dated – covered up by the latest attacks on our communities and environment. But our team is keeping our eyes on the prize – creating an Illinois that protects its only sole source aquifer from the threats of carbon pollution, advances statewide climate action, celebrates public access to rivers and nature, and holds the line against the dismantling of our bedrock environmental protections.

And, I'm not going to sugarcoat it – it's been a tough few months for our team as we adjust to the Trump administration's relentless attacks on our environment, our democracy, and our values. By now we have become conditioned to expect a daily new barrage of assaults to our future. I'm sure you have seen numerous headlines and stories that stop you right in your tracks and ask, "what are we going to do!?!"

Well, I have a suggestion – let's speak out as if our future is on fire. Let's raise our collective voices, support our neighbors, get out on the streets, and lean in with Prairie Rivers Network as we work to build a stronger Illinois.

With gratitude, determination, and every bit of grit,

HEAL LAND HOLDING OUR GROUND

**WHAT THE FEDERAL FUNDING ROLLBACKS
MEAN FOR ILLINOIS AND WHAT PRN IS DOING
MOVING FORWARD.**

A change in U.S. federal administration was always expected to bring shifts in climate and environmental programs. What we didn't anticipate was the speed and severity with which federal climate funding, environmental regulations, and the federal workforce would be slashed and frankly demoralized.

The Executive Order on "Unleashing American Energy" called for an "immediate pause" on climate and energy funding from the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL). Funding was halted that was already promised to Illinois businesses, communities, and organizations for critical infrastructure investments, pollution clean-up, and clean energy projects. Congress is now looking to permanently repeal the climate and energy programs in these historic federal laws, all to fund more tax cuts for billionaires and polluters. After the initial chaos of firing then rehiring employees, federal agencies have been instructed to plan for "reductions in force" that could slash the federal workforce. These funding streams, and the staff that support them, are critical for increasing energy independence, protecting our air and water, protecting natural areas and public lands, and promoting a more resilient future in Illinois and beyond.

HOW FEDERAL INVESTMENTS HAVE TRANSFORMED ILLINOIS

Illinois has already seen major benefits from these historic investments. Opportunities have included everything from energy audits and solar projects for community buildings, clean school buses, lead pipe replacements, abandoned mine land reclamation, tree planting and more.

Prairie Rivers Network has been there supporting communities in harnessing these funding opportunities. In 2024 alone we reached hundreds of communities through educational webinars and materials, and we worked directly with more than 50 communities across Illinois to navigate grants and technical assistance for solar projects, pollution clean-up, water infrastructure, and climate resilience projects.

In particular, the following federal programs have been game changers for creating more resilient communities across Illinois, and many of these programs have already been stymied.



Aerial photo of four bodies of water showing different levels of coal pollution from abandoned mine lands near Demon Waters in Southern Illinois.

RURAL ENERGY FOR AMERICA PROGRAM (REAP)

Grants and loans have supported Illinois farmers and rural businesses in adopting renewable energy and energy efficiency projects to reduce operating costs and boost local economies. Nearly all the REAP recipients from the past year learned that the funds they were promised have been frozen. As we write this, we are encouraged to learn that some of these committed funds may start moving again, but the future of this program is uncertain.

CLEAN ENERGY TAX CREDITS

Thanks to the IRA, schools, nonprofits, and local governments can now install solar energy systems with direct pay tax credits, making clean energy more affordable and accessible. Encoded in tax law, these tax credits should be safe for now, but we must fight for maintaining these critical incentives in the future.

ABANDONED MINE LAND CLEANUP

Increased federal funding has been critical for cleaning up abandoned mine lands (AML) in Illinois, turning these sites into productive economic assets while addressing long-standing pollution issues. After a temporary freeze in funding the state is receiving these funds again, but future years of funding for AML reclamation is at major risk leaving communities across Illinois vulnerable to unchecked pollution.

PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

IRA and BIL federal investments have also funded critical infrastructure like clean school buses, water projects, tree plantings, and climate resiliency projects in communities large and small, reducing emissions and saving Illinois taxpayers millions. The funding for many of these projects has been halted and the future of the programs is uncertain.

For rural, coal, and disadvantaged communities, these programs and more have provided a lifeline, bringing long-overdue investments to areas hit hardest by economic downturns and industrial decline. Halting these funds betrays the communities that most need economic revitalization and environmental progress.

MOVING FORWARD: PROTECTING ILLINOIS' CLEAN ENERGY FUTURE

Illinois has built and will continue to build strong momentum in climate action, thanks to state-level leadership through policies like 2021's Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) and this year's proposed Clean & Reliable Grid Affordability Act (CRGA). Federal funds, programs, and staff are critical to complementing our state programs and ensuring an equitable clean energy transition nationwide.

At Prairie Rivers Network, we are committed to continuing to help communities navigate environmental funding through technical assistance, grant guidance, and strategic support. We will hold policymakers and polluters accountable to keep Illinois on track toward a cleaner, more resilient future.

We know that clean energy and climate resilience are economic and public health imperatives if we are to mitigate the worst of our changing climate. Illinois has seen firsthand how these investments can rebuild economies, strengthen infrastructure, and create a more sustainable future. These efforts must be protected, not undermined.

WE WILL CONTINUE STANDING WITH ILLINOIS COMMUNITIES, FARMERS, SMALL BUSINESSES, AND LOCAL LEADERS TO FIGHT FOR THE RESOURCES AND FUTURE THEY DESERVE.

PROTECT WATER

OUR HOME. OUR WATER. OUR AQUIFER.

LEGISLATIVE WINS AND NEXT STEPS FOR PROTECTING THE MAHOMET AQUIFER.

Note: This is a quickly developing story and may be out of date by the time it hits your mailbox! For more timely updates, please visit prairierivers.org/mahomet-latest

Every once in a while, an issue unites people across the board. Right now, we're close to one: The Mahomet Aquifer is too precious a drinking water source to risk for anything - especially experimental technologies like carbon sequestration.

The momentum behind this campaign has been incredible. Mayors across the aquifer are speaking up. Three counties have independently taken action and more on the way. Meetings in Champaign County were packed, often standing-room only. Volunteers have poured their energy into handmade signs and made powerful speeches, while Protect the Mahomet Aquifer yard signs are appearing across Central Illinois. The message is clear: People are standing up to protect our water.

Yet some polluters see our drinking water as something worth gambling with — proposing to store carbon at scales never done before in Illinois while also pushing the Trump Administration to dismantle or revoke historic environmental protections like the Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act.

The fight to protect the Mahomet Aquifer is far from over, and a lot has happened so far in 2025. Here's an update on where things stand and what's ahead this spring.

CHAMPAIGN COUNTY TAKES A CRITICAL STEP

On January 23, the Champaign County Board took decisive action, passing a 12-month moratorium on carbon sequestration projects. This temporary halt gives local leaders time to establish zoning protections for the Mahomet Aquifer, which supplies clean drinking water to nearly one million people in Central Illinois. Since January, a task force has been formed and we are on track for a proper ban before the moratorium expires.

This victory was driven by growing community concerns over the dangers of injecting carbon dioxide underground. The Mahomet Aquifer is our sole drinking water source — not a testing ground for carbon sequestration projects 50 times larger than anything previously attempted in Illinois.

County board members have expressed their intent to draft a full ban—following the lead of Ford and DeWitt Counties, which have already prohibited carbon sequestration through the aquifer. But the Mahomet Aquifer spans 14 counties.

Without state action, we will need to pass bans in every single county to fully safeguard our water.

LOOKING TO SPRINGFIELD FOR A STATEWIDE BAN

While the push for county action buys time, only a statewide ban can provide lasting protection for the entire Mahomet Aquifer — and any future sole-source aquifers.

State Senator Paul Faraci (D-Champaign) and State Representative Carol Ammons (D-Urbana), with bipartisan support from the entire Mahomet Aquifer region, have reintroduced bills to permanently ban carbon sequestration beneath or through the Mahomet and its recharge areas.

On Thursday April 10th, the bill to protect the Mahomet Aquifer from carbon sequestration (SB1723) passed the Illinois Senate on a 55-0 vote. It was a powerful moment, with bill sponsor Senator Faraci evoking the legacy of the late Senator Scott Bennett in his comments on the bill. Its passage brought a round of applause in the Senate chambers.

The Senate bill now heads to the House with Representative Ammons as the chief sponsor. We expect a committee hearing in the last week of April, and a possible floor vote shortly after that - perhaps will have already been heard by the time you read this!

The Protect the Mahomet Aquifer campaign — led by Prairie Rivers Network, Eco-Justice Collaborative, Sierra Club Illinois Chapter, Illinois People's Action, and others — is working to push this bill forward. But we need your help.

HOW YOU CAN TAKE ACTION

Passing this bill will require strong public support. Here's how you can help:

- Call or email your state representative and urge them to cosponsor and vote yes on SB1723.
- If you use the Mahomet Aquifer for your drinking water, attend local meetings and hearings to show public demand for action.
- Spread awareness on social media and in conversations with friends and neighbors.
- Sign our petition and back advocacy efforts from environmental organizations.

NOW IS THE TIME TO PUSH FOR A PERMANENT SOLUTION. THE ILLINOIS GENERAL ASSEMBLY HAS THE OPPORTUNITY TO CLOSE DANGEROUS LOOPHOLES AND ENSURE THE MAHOMET AQUIFER REMAINS CLEAN AND SAFE FOR GENERATIONS TO COME. LET'S NOT MISS THIS MOMENT.

INSPIRE CHANGE NURTURED IN NATURE

**NEW COLLABORATION WORKING TO
CLOSE THE NATURE GAP IN ILLINOIS.**

Prairie Rivers Network is proud to support Nurtured in Nature, a transformative outdoor wellness program dedicated to creating inclusive, restorative experiences for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities in an effort to close the nature gap across Illinois. Founded and directed by Tomas Delgado – PRN’s 2024 River Steward awardee, Nurtured in Nature is more than just a hiking program — it’s an initiative designed to foster healing, connection, and empowerment between BIPOC communities and in the natural environment.

The Center for American Progress (CAP) defines the Nature Gap as the unequal access to nature and green spaces experienced by communities of color and low-income communities, who are more likely to live in nature-deprived areas due to historical and systemic injustices in land use, urban planning, and environmental policy, patterns that have perpetuated legacies of racialized trauma for communities of color. According to CAP’s 2020 report, 77% of Illinois communities of color are considered nature-deprived, compared to just 21% of white communities, pointing to a clear need for supporting equitable access to green spaces and the natural environment.

Rooted in the belief that access to nature is a fundamental right, this initiative removes systemic barriers that have historically excluded BIPOC individuals from outdoor spaces. Through trauma-informed, culturally relevant experiences, Nurtured in Nature offers safe, welcoming opportunities to explore the outdoors while building community and confidence.

“It’s about ensuring diverse voices are part of the broader movement to protect and steward our environment.



Nature belongs to all of us, and everyone should have the chance to feel at home in it and contribute their expertise to defending it”, says Delgado. “Environmental protection and the pursuit of environmental justice can be fueled by joy. Nurtured in Nature’s foremost goal is to cultivate that joy through making new friendships, marveling at the natural world, and, in the process, strengthening community bonds and building resilience. As a community-based solution to climate change, this work creates stronger, more equitable pathways for those most impacted by environmental degradation to not only get out and enjoy nature with community members but also access climate and environmental justice tools, resources, and decision-making spaces.”

With support from Prairie Rivers Network, Nurtured in Nature is expanding beyond Champaign County to serve more Illinois communities. The program will host seasonal hikes and outdoor gatherings, starting with a Spring hike at Kickapoo State Park on April 12th. Participants will be provided space to reconnect with nature in ways that are accessible, low-pressure, with the primary goal of building connections and new friendships.

By addressing systemic barriers tied to historical racial exclusion, such as the legacy of sundown towns near many local parks and preserves, Nurtured in Nature aims to reclaim these spaces for BIPOC communities. Through safe and empowering outdoor experiences, participants gain tools to confidently engage with natural spaces while fostering a sense of belonging.

**BY RECLAIMING OUTDOOR SPACES AND
AMPLIFYING BIPOC VOICES, NURTURED IN
NATURE IS HELPING CLOSE THE NATURE GAP.**



CHANGES TO THE PRN BOARD OF DIRECTORS

We are excited to announce the addition of two outstanding new board members, Dr. Abigail Derby Lewis and Tracy Meints Fox, who bring decades of conservation expertise, community activism, and a deep commitment to protecting Illinois' natural resources.



DR. ABIGAIL DERBY LEWIS – GLENVIEW, ILLINOIS

Dr. Abigail Derby Lewis joins our board with two decades of experience in community-centered conservation, wildlife ecology, and climate action. In 2025, she became the first Executive Director of Citizens for Conservation, leading efforts to protect and restore natural spaces across northeastern Illinois.

Previously, Abigail directed interdisciplinary teams at the Field Museum's Keller Science Action Center, working with universities, nonprofits, and Indigenous communities to transform research into on-the-ground conservation action. She played a key role in advancing equitable climate solutions through the Chicago Wilderness Alliance and served on the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission for over a decade, including as Chair from 2022 to 2024. Abigail is passionate about fostering inclusive, science-based conservation efforts that connect people with nature.

TRACY MEINTS FOX – RURAL PEORIA COUNTY, ILLINOIS

Tracy Meints Fox is a lifelong environmental activist who has dedicated years to protecting Illinois' rivers, wetlands, and natural landscapes. Whether birding along the Illinois River Valley or working to save Plum Island, Tracy has been a steadfast advocate for conservation.

Her activism has helped strengthen Illinois climate legislation, halt road projects, establish Peoria Park District's newest park at Rocky Glen, and end decades of coal pollution at the Edwards coal plant. She also serves as an Audubon Christmas Bird Count Coordinator and is active with numerous local environmental organizations. When asked about her favorite river, she chose the Illinois River—especially its tributaries, Senachwine and Kickapoo Creeks.



THANK YOU, CHARLOTTE WESTCOTT

As we welcome new leadership, we also extend our deepest gratitude to Charlotte Westcott for her years of dedicated service on our board. Charlotte has been a steadfast advocate for our mission, and her contributions have left a lasting impact.

**PLEASE JOIN US IN
WELCOMING ABIGAIL
AND TRACY TO THE
BOARD AND IN
THANKING CHARLOTTE
FOR HER INVALUABLE
SERVICE!**

THANK YOU, SILAS & JOHNATHAN

As we welcome new leadership, we also want to take a moment to express our gratitude to Silas Gilklay and Johnathan Hettinger for their time and contributions to Prairie Rivers Network. Silas and Johnathan each made an impact during their time at Prairie Rivers Network. While we will miss them both, we are excited to see where their talents and passion take them next.

Thank you, Silas and Johnathan, for your hard work, dedication, and commitment to protecting water, healing land, and inspiring change. We wish you all the best in your next adventures!

STAFF

MAGGIE BRUNS

Executive Director

KIM ERNDT-PITCHER

Director of Ecological Health

ANTHONY HENSON

Rural Energy Organizer

ROBERT HIRSCHFELD

Director of Water Policy

VICKIE NUDELMAN

Director of Operations & Finance

AMANDA PANKAU

Director of Climate & Community Resiliency

ANDREW REHN

Director of Climate Policy

SARAH SCOTT

Membership Development Associate

NINA STRUSS

River Health & Resiliency Organizer

JIZELLE TORRES

Climate & Energy Program Assistant

DEVIN WALKER

Development Director

RANDA WATTS

Clean Water Organizer

MADELYN WITRUK

Communications & Engagement Specialist

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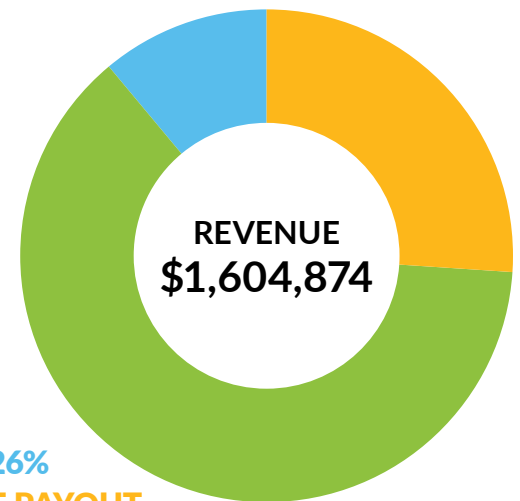
CLARK BULLARD

MICHAEL ROSENTHAL

DR. ABIGAIL DERBY-LEWIS

TRACY MEINTS FOX

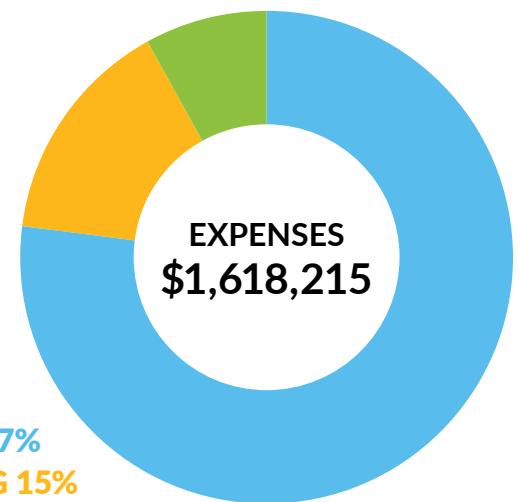
2024 FINANCIAL SNAPSHOT AND ANNUAL REPORT



GRANTS 63%

DONATIONS 26%

ENDOWMENT PAYOUT,
INTEREST, OTHER 11%



PROGRAMS 77%

FUNDRAISING 15%

GENERAL & ADMIN 8%

PRN ENDOWMENT = \$573,008

This financial snapshot shows our 2024 operating revenue and expenses plus the current value of our endowment at the end of the year. Prairie Rivers Network ran a deficit in 2024 to focus on growing our team and resources to meet the rising challenges ahead.

Learn more about accomplishments from 2024 in our online annual report at prairierivers.org/annualreport

Our financial statements are audited each year by an independent certified accountant and are available along with our Federal 990 at prairierivers.org.



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